

CHAPTER ONE

“If colored folks could move the energy they use getting through and getting over to getting it right, they would be running this joint by now,” Pop ranted from the caverns of Pearl’s mind as she watched the young couple stroll leisurely on the road past her expansive, manicured and fenced front yard and porch. Without being able to see them clearly in the distance, Pearl knew the teenage boy was tall, dark and slender with dimples deep enough for that girl to plant and root dreams in, and she was a pretty little thing with all of her curves in just the right places for him to weave fantasies around. That neat fellow said something that tickled her and she let out an un-ladylike yelp and buried her face in his sleeve. His head bent slightly and he inhaled the intoxicating scent of her hair and perfume. It obviously pleased him because he rested his chin on top of her head momentarily and let out a deep, longing sigh. Wanting to embrace her, his free hand lightly stroked her shoulder.

Pop bellowed from long ago, “Fool, if you don’t take your hands off that girl, your mama will be hanging on the side of your coffin pleading with the Lord to give you back!” Then, from behind Pearl came a loud, sharp, “Bang!”

The slamming of the screen door on Pearl Little’s neat, three bedroom, blue two- storied house startled her and wiped away all thoughts of the blissful couple and Pop’s age-old comments, but she knew who the culprit was and held her peace with the irritating distraction. Pearl’s father, Barry Little, known as “Pop”, would have come out of that rocker and popped Angela so hard that the lesson of allowing the screen door to slam shut would only need to be taught once. Pearl, however, could not make herself rise to strike Angela or even muster the anger necessary to yell at her. After all, Angela Bowman was Pearl’s gift from God, being the only person left in the world worth mentioning who cared if Pearl lived or died.

Angela had come out to join Pearl on the porch for a while and she carried in her hands a tray with two tall, perspiring glasses of iced tea and a bowl of Pearl's favorite fresh, ripe strawberries topped with whipped cream. Angela hummed happily as she sat the tray on the table that separated the two high-back, white, wicker rockers and took in the beautiful scenery surrounding the house. It never ceased to amaze her that she had been rescued from what she thought of as the bowels of existence and been brought to this breathtakingly peaceful safe haven with no questions asked, no bills presented and no restrictions or stipulations. How Pearl had managed to simply overlook the despicable state Angela was in when she stumbled upon her on the road fascinated the younger woman. All Pearl had said to Angela that late, winter afternoon was, "Child, you look on the outside like I feel on the inside . . . beat up and dragged through the mud. Come on and let's try to clean you up." Angela had followed Pearl home that day and not left for more than a few hours to shop in town since then.

Noticing the cuddling couple on the road, Angela shook her head and said, "Now Pop wouldn't have cared much for all that touching, would he, Pearl?"

Glancing at the couple again, Pearl replied, "Not a bit. And a girl with good sense would never let Pop see her in that compromising position either." Pearl smiled wanly at something she had not shared with Angela and offered instead, "When are you going to spread your wings and try flying again, Angela? This house is no place for a young, pretty thing like yourself."

"Fly?" Angela asked with a twisted frown on her face. "Not ready yet, Pearl. Walking will have to do for me a little while longer—that is if you don't mind me being here."

"You know I don't mind. I just remember how I felt about life when I was your age. How much I looked forward to trying to be prettier to that special boy in my life each day. That boy who made going to school a pleasure and a trip to the grocery store an adventure."

Pearl and Angela

3

Shocked, Angela asked, “Did Pop know you felt like that about some boy, Pearl?”

“Oh, no. Pop thought I loved reading, writing and geography, but the truth was I loved Kendall. Pop never knew that I spent most of my days writing Kendall’s name over and over.”

Sipping from her glass, Angela said, “I bet you and Kendall didn’t do what those two are doing right now.”

Pearl smiled and shrugged and never offered another syllable on the subject of Kendall Stratton. “What did you do with yourself today, Angela? Did you go over to Shockley’s Market and ask Mr. Shockley about that bookkeeping position he had open?”

“Uh, yes, I did. He offered me the job, Pearl, but I don’t think I should accept it.”

“Why not?”

Looking down into her glass as if the answers to the universe would magically appear at the heart of one of the cubes of ice, Angela answered distantly, “He doesn’t want me to count his money, Pearl.”

“Well, what does he want? That’s what Raynard told me he wanted from you,” Pearl snapped with an expression of disgust on her face.

“He would tell you that. You’re such a nice woman that you would never suspect the real reason. Did you ask him to hire me, Pearl?”

Pearl responded sternly, “No. Raynard asked me if I thought you could handle his books for him, and I told him I was sure you could. I mean you handle my house accounts better than I do. I actually have money I know about at the end of the month. But, that’s not the point here. What does Shockley want from you, Angela?”

“What they all want, Pearl. What would Pop say he wanted?”

Not needing to conjure what her father would have said, Pearl heard Pop’s voice anyway. “She’s a pretty, clean, young woman. That alone makes a man lick his chops. He can brush her smooth, soft skin with the back of his hand and feel his fluids surge. If he

ever closes his fingers around her arm, his satisfaction will be the only way he lets her go.”

Pearl snapped angrily, “I’ll set that nasty old piece of trash straight when I go to town tomorrow, Angela. Raynard Shockley won’t be trying to get to you through my stupidity.” Rising from her rocker suddenly, Pearl spat, “I’ve been stupid all my damn life, and somehow men have always known it. They’re still trying to take advantage of me!” Pearl strutted across the porch, opened the screen door, entered the cool foyer, and let it slam shut.

Angela followed her friend inside saying, “Pearl, it’s not your fault that he did that. I don’t even think Mr. Shockley is completely aware of why he asked after me. I just think that he wants a young woman to look at from time-to-time through his long day and I’m not doing anything else. I really could work for him, Pearl. I do need the money to start paying my way some around here.”

“You don’t have to sell yourself to that old lecher to pay your way around my house! No woman should ever have to sell herself!”

Stroking Pearl’s shoulder to soothe her, Angela said softly, “I don’t know why I said that to you. Mr. Shockley has never done or said anything to make me think he wanted anything from me, Pearl. I saw that little girl on the road being loved by that nice boy, and I can’t picture myself in her shoes; that’s all. My world was never nice and pretty until you came along, Pearl. I’m sorry I said that. Forget it. Let’s go drink our tea and enjoy those strawberries.”

Pearl looked into Angela’s sad eyes and said, “I know that life hasn’t been kind to you, Angela, but you can make it right. I’ll help you make it right. I promise.”

“I thought Pop said that we couldn’t make . . .,” Pearl’s hand covered Angela’s mouth, stopping Pop’s version of women’s roles in the world from spilling into the air. Angela nodded in agreement with the older woman and the two went back out to the porch, but this time Angela closed the screen door softly, the way it was supposed to be closed. The way Pop would have wanted it.

CHAPTER TWO

One week later, Angela Bowman studied her reflection in the hallway mirror between the foyer and the living room and all of her uncertainties about accepting the position at Shockley's Market loomed large in her mind. The pretty gray pinstripe suit Pearl had been kind enough to buy Angela for this occasion fit perfectly. Angela would have preferred something that did not accentuate her figure, but Pearl thought this one made her look like a no-nonsense businesswoman. There were no frills on the crisply starched and ironed, white blouse that was tightly buttoned and revealed no flesh. The skirt flowed to and stopped at Angela's shapely mid-calf, meeting caramel stockings that were not exactly the right shade for a bronze colored woman, but they were all that was available in this half-a-horse town. Her shoes were black and sturdy with a low heel. Collecting her tiny black purse from the telephone table near the front door, Angela smoothed her freshly pressed and curled pageboy took a deep breath and joined Pearl in the kitchen.

Pearl's welcoming smile vanished when she saw the stoic expression on Angela's attractive face, and asked, "What's wrong? Why do you look like you're heading off to be drawn and quartered?"

With a tear dangling from her eyelash, Angela answered, "I feel like I'm going to be just that, Pearl. Your house has been the only place I've ever been that didn't hurt, and stepping outside frightens me."

Shaking her head from side-to-side, Pearl said, “Don’t be afraid, Angela. I told you I would be here to help you find your place—and I will. If Raynard gets close enough to smell your perfume, you call me and I’ll be right there to collect you.”

“I’m not wearing any perfume. Do you think I should?”

“No,” Pearl said without hesitation. “He might think you put it on for him. You did the right thing. Just go down there and do your job, Angela. It’s going to be all right. I don’t think Raynard Shockley is as low-down as some other men we’ve known.” Pearl brightened again. “Come on and have a little breakfast before you start out on your new life.”

Taking her seat at the table, Angela smiled weakly saying, “Okay, but I hope I don’t have to clean it up off of Mr. Shockley. You know how my stomach is when I get nervous, Pearl.”

“If he makes you nervous enough to puke on him, he deserves it. Let him clean himself up,” Pearl said as she ladled grits onto Angela’s plate.

The two women ate breakfast and shared idle chatter about the vegetable and flower gardens, the chickens, and the fence around the property. Pop had insisted that every inch of his home and grounds be kept in pristine condition. Chipped paint, rust, and weeds were his mortal enemies. Pearl normally saw to every repair personally, but Angela had begun to take on more and more of those responsibilities since her arrival. Angela thought she could still handle it after work, but Pearl wouldn’t hear of it. After all, Pearl had never worked outside of her home, and the men in her life had made sure that she never had to. Pop had left Pearl this house and the property it rested on, a few small insurance policies, and ten strategically buried jars, each bearing one thousand dollars. Pearl’s husband, Chancellor Jessup, had been more generous, the rent from his deceased parents’ property and the property from Pearl and Chancellor’s marriage gave Pearl a good monthly income for necessities and kept up the taxes on all of the properties.

Angela's spirits were as high as Pearl could hoist them as she walked along the road toward town that morning. There was not a cloud in the sky, as the sun took its place, and Angela knew it was going to be a pleasant morning. She hoped that was an omen for her first day at Shockley's Market.

The tinkle of the bell over the door in the market alerted Raynard Shockley of Angela's arrival and he sprinted from the back rooms where he lived to the front with a gigantic smile on his face. Raynard Shockley was a handsome Black-Apache of forty-five. Smooth biscuit brown skin glowed beneath his thick, neatly combed and lightly salted, black hair, eyebrows and long lashes—all providing just the right landscape for his big brown, expressive eyes. Mr. Shockley's warm smile was slightly tilted, exposing a neat set of white teeth that were his own. The white apron he wore everyday was spotless, as were the bland, beige clothing he wore beneath it and his large, smooth hands.

"Good morning, Angela. You're early. I've just finished cooking. Would you like to join me for some breakfast?"

Shaking her head nervously, Angela replied, "No, sir. I had breakfast already."

"Well, I know you know your way around the market, but let me show you the office and you can make yourself comfortable while I have my breakfast. Perhaps you would like a cup of coffee, or a glass of tea, after your long walk in. What about orange juice?"

"No, sir. I'm fine." Angela said quickly and added as an afterthought, "Thank you."

Accepting Angela's refusals, Raynard turned saying, "Well, follow me then." He led her to the back of the market and through the curtain into a small hallway with several doors along it. Raynard opened the first door on the left and Angela saw that it was a water closet, and that it was clean. The next door on the left was the office. There was an old mahogany desk overflowing with papers, a straight-back chair, a wastebasket and oak wood cabinets. The wallpaper had at one time been bright, but had long

since lost its glow, and the curtains were brown and flat. The linoleum had seen better days too, and from Angela's estimation, that would have been before she was born.

Raynard turned on the overhead light and pulled the chord on the ceiling fan while Angela headed directly for the curtains. Opening them, Angela tried to lift the window. This obviously had not happened in her lifetime either. Seeing Angela's struggle with the window, Raynard coughed in his hand and said with a smile in his voice, "Um, you have to turn the nails or it will never open, Angela."

Trying to turn the first nail, Angela yelped. Raynard took one step toward her and the ferocious expression on her face stopped him cold. He asked timidly, "Did you hurt yourself? Let me get that. I haven't opened these windows in years. I don't spend very much time in here."

Cradling her splintered finger, Angela inched away from Raynard and the window. She watched him release the nailed window and lift it with ease. The sight of the sunshine soothed Angela because she saw a way out. When Raynard turned toward her Angela jumped back again. Raynard decided this was a good time to leave her to collect herself, and he did just that with Angela's eyes on his every move.

With Raynard Shockley out of the office, Angela let out a deep sigh of relief and set about tending her finger. Freed from the splinter and the blood staunching with a handkerchief from her purse, Angela sat at the desk and started sifting through the piles of paper. She saw right away why Mr. Shockley needed her. He had not put anything into any semblance of order in nearly two years. The store bills and receipts were mixed in with the house bills and the checkbook did not say which check had been written to whom or for what. An hour into her sifting, Angela found another checkbook and realized that he actually did run two separate accounts.

Raynard finished his breakfast and walked past the office into the market. He left Angela to her own devices for a while longer because her reaction had unnerved him. The last thing he needed or wanted in his office was a skittish woman accusing him of doing things to her.

Losing Mrs. Wilson had been hard on Raynard, and it was difficult for him to replace her. She had been so much more than a bookkeeper for him. Mrs. Wilson was more like his mother, always looking out for him in every way, seeing that he and his father had properly cooked meals and that they didn't let the house go too far astray; nursing Raynard through many hangovers in his wild, young days, and occasional bouts of confusion and depression. She had also screened the women in his life and had saved Raynard from a lifetime of heartbreaking grief. Mrs. Wilson had also prevented Raynard from marrying and having a family of his own, and there were times when he resented her for it. But, as time went on, Raynard saw for himself the woman he had wanted to marry nearly fifteen years earlier was every bad thing Mrs. Wilson had accused her of being and some she had not discovered. Because his father had raised him alone, Mrs. Wilson had taught Raynard pretty much everything about how to conduct his business and live decently. The only territory she refused to let him wander through were the books. At that moment, he couldn't help but wonder what she would have thought of him hiring Angela Bowman to replace her.

* * *

Pearl went about her chores around the house after Angela left for her first day at Shockley's Market. She washed the dishes, scrubbed the kitchen floor, dusted and polished the furniture. When all was done, Pearl stood in the middle of the neat living room and surveyed her work. If only she could wipe away some of the past the way she had the dust, Pearl's life would be perfect.

Knowing that was an impossibility, she settled for everything as Pop would have wanted it—nothing out of place, not a speck of dust, and positively no photographs. “Pictures hold memories and memories are best avoided. There will be no memories in my house,” Pop had said on many occasions. At noon, Pearl patted her neatly braided hair in the foyer mirror, inspected her lipstick and left Pop’s house.

CHAPTER THREE

Angela had lost herself in the sorting of paperwork on the desk in the office when Raynard returned nearly an hour later. He stood near the doorway when he spoke. "Did you find everything you need, Angela?"

"I haven't really looked for anything yet. I was just trying to sort through what you have here on this desk. I want to put it all in some order that I can understand."

"Oh," Raynard said as he entered the office and approached the file cabinets. "Mrs. Wilson kept records in journals. Let me find one for you." He opened the top drawer, pulled out a thick, green, cloth-covered book and placed it on the desk in front of Angela.

"Is that the house or business journal, Mr. Shockley?"

"You know what, I don't know. You look at it and determine those kinds of things, and if it's not what you need, I'm sure what you're looking for is in one of these drawers."

Looking around the drab office, Angela asked, "Did Mrs. Wilson work in this office all day?"

"No. She used this as storage. She worked on the porch on good days and at the dining room table on rainy days. That way she could keep an eye on my dinner while I ran the market."

Drawing back, Angela asked, "Am I supposed to keep an eye on your dinner, Mr. Shockley?"

Holding his hands up, Raynard replied quickly, "No, Angela. She did that because she wanted to. It was not a requirement."

“Okay. I don’t want to keep an eye on your dinner, Mr. Shockley. But, I will have to ask if I can have some things to spruce up this office. You know . . . paint, curtains, a new linoleum. I feel like I’m in a dungeon in here.”

“You sure can, and I’ll help you in any way I can when I don’t have customers in the market.”

Giving him a stare from complete stillness, Angela finally said, “You won’t have to do that either, Mr. Shockley. I’m quite capable of painting the walls on my own.”

“Okay. But, please allow me to do any moving of furniture, Angela. I wouldn’t want you hurting yourself. Now, is there anything I can get for you right this minute?”

“A broom, a pail of water, some detergent, bleach and cleaning rags should keep me busy for a while today. Thank you.”

The telephone rang in the market and Raynard excused himself to answer it. Angela was hoping it was Pearl calling to check on her, but it wasn’t. A customer was calling in their order so that they could just pick it up when they came into town to get the mail. Angela learned quite a bit about how Mr. Shockley ran his business during the day without really intending to. She heard every patron enter the store, their conversations and bartering strategies. The black customers ran tabs and paid what they could when they could and the white customers only patronized Shockley when their store, Brody’s, on the other side of the street didn’t have what they needed and the majority paid cash. The others looked embarrassed and paid what they could when they could too.

Angela made neat piles of most of the papers on the desk as her morning task. At noon, Raynard stuck his head in the door and asked, “What would you like for supper, Angela? I have some chicken, cornbread and okra left over from dinner last night. Or would you like me to slice you some ham or beef and bread?”

Never having given thought to a mid-day meal, Angela realized she was getting hungry, but she wouldn’t start anything

that made Mr. Shockley think they were in any way friends. She would pack something for herself from now on.

“I’m fine, Mr. Shockley. I’ll eat dinner when I get back to Pearl’s. Did she call me today?”

“No, Pearl hasn’t called. You can call her, if you’d like.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you.” Angela said and waited for him to go away. When she heard his footsteps head toward the back, Angela rose from the desk and made her way to the telephone on the wall in the market. She dialed Pearl’s telephone number and waited. The telephone rang and rang uninterrupted. Thinking Pearl might be doing something in one of the gardens, Angela hung up and returned to the office. The two women had cut the grass together on Sunday, so Angela knew Pearl wouldn’t be working in the yard. The cleaning tools Mr. Shockley had brought Angela earlier occupied the rest of her afternoon giving the office its first wipe down.

Near the end of her day, Angela asked for permission to use the telephone again and Mr. Shockley nodded. She again dialed Pearl’s telephone number and received no response. Speaking out loud to herself, “Now, where on earth is she?”

Mr. Shockley asked, “Where on earth is who, Angela?”

“Pearl.”

“She might be visiting.”

“Visiting who? I’m the only friend Pearl Little has.”

Looking at Angela as if she were truly strange, Raynard asked, “What makes you think Pearl Jessup . . . I mean Pearl Little doesn’t have any friends besides you?”

“She told me so,” Angela replied crisply.

“I think of myself as a friend of Pearl’s, Angela. I’ve known her all of my life. We went to school together.”

“Well, she obviously doesn’t share your memories of your times together because she says that I’m her only friend. And who is Pearl Jessup?”

“If you don’t know who she is, I guess it doesn’t matter,” Raynard replied from his stooped position in the corner and went on with stocking shelves.

Walking toward the door leading to the office, Angela mumbled, “I bet Pop wouldn’t care too much for you pretending to be so familiar with Pearl.”

Raynard rose up to respond to her comment, thought it would be better not to, and resumed his shelf stocking. He hoped he would not have to tell Angela that the less he heard about Barry “Pop” Little, the better. The man was not right in his head and he had let anyone who came within earshot of him know it.

There was no more conversation between Raynard Shockley and Angela Bowman for the remainder of the day. Neither said goodnight when she packed her purse and strolled out of the market. The fact that there were customers in the market was not the reason for this lack of courtesy either. Raynard was thinking he might have made a mistake in hiring the odd behaving young woman and Angela was thinking she might have made a mistake in accepting the position with a man who thought he knew her friend better than she did.

Lots of people were on the road heading home from work and school that afternoon, and they all made Angela slightly uncomfortable. She was brushed and jostled in passing a lot more than she cared for and the town’s few trucks and automobiles made the crush on the road nothing less than dangerous. As she dodged from the path of a rickety old truck, Angela thought she saw someone she recognized quite a bit ahead of her on the road. She strained to see the tiny figure again but people kept getting in the way. Between the heat from the paved road and the heat being exuded by the crowd, Angela dabbed at the perspiration on her face and abandoned her attempts to see the woman again.

Angela finally arrived at the gate of Pearl Little’s property and hated the fact that the house sat so far back from the road. She was so hot, tired and hungry that she felt like she might not make it

that far. After trudging up the long driveway, climbing the porch steps and clearing the doorway, Angela called out, “Pearl. Pearl. Are you here?”

A smiling Pearl came to the kitchen doorway and answered, “Yes, I am. How was your first day? Did Shockley chase you around the counter?”

Not seeing the humor in her questions, Angela said, “My day was fine and no, Mr. Shockley did not chase me. I tried calling you twice today and I didn’t get an answer. Where were you, Pearl?”

“Visiting.”

“Visiting?!” Angela shouted. “Visiting who?! I thought I was your only friend in the world, Pearl!”

“You are my only friend, Angela,” Pearl responded apologetically.

“Mr. Shockley doesn’t think so. He says he’s a friend of yours too.”

Giving a weak smile, Pearl said, “That was very kind of Raynard to say, Angela. I’ve always thought he was being nice to me because I shop at his market exclusively.”

“Who were you visiting, Pearl?”

Dismissing Angela’s question, Pearl asked, “What would you like for dinner?”

Not distracted from her question, Angela repeated, “Who were you visiting, Pearl?”

“What would you like for dinner, Angela?”

The two women stood facing each other in the large, bright kitchen and neither budged from her position on the question-and-no-answer session they were having. “This is why Pop gave you such a hard time, Pearl. You’re a liar and he hated liars,” Angela spat biting, spun around and left Pearl standing there.

Pearl went about preparing dinner, and the two sat down at the dining room table at six o’clock that evening. Pearl passed the mashed potatoes on to Angela and placed a slice of meatloaf

smothered in gravy on her own plate. Angela prepared her plate without saying anything to Pearl either. The two sat for more than half an hour eating in silence before Pearl finally said, “When I came up on you in the road, Angela, I never asked you one question about yourself and I would appreciate you returning the courtesy. There are things in my life I choose not to discuss with anyone.”

“But, I thought I was your friend. If you had asked me questions, I would have answered you, Pearl. I wouldn’t call you my only friend and then sneak around visiting my other friends behind your back.”

“I’m not visiting friends, Angela, and that’s all I have to say on the subject. If your sudden realization has cast me in an unsavory light in your eyes, the door is always open for you to come or go.”

“Why are you keeping secrets, Pearl?”

“Why are you keeping secrets, Angela?”

“What secrets are you talking about?”

“Who are you, Angela? Where are your folks? Do you have a family? Why were you on the road? You’re too smart to be a common road hussie, Angela. Why are you so bitter at the thought of a man touching you?”

Angela’s voice was soft when she said, “My mother and father are in Chicago. They left me here with friends. Friends who made me work for a living. I did all kinds of things for money, Pearl, good and bad. Does that answer your questions?”

“No. You’re lying, Angela. Your wounds run too deep for that to be all there is to the story. Why would your mother and father just up and leave you here with friends? What were their names? What part of town did they live in? This is a small town, Angela, and every family name is known. There are no Bowmans within two hundred miles of this place. Tell the truth.”

Looking Pearl in the eyes, Angela spoke sharply, “My parents sold me to a family named Marse who live west of here in Lafayette when I was six-years-old.”

“You didn’t like saying that, did you, Angela? Those are the kinds of things I don’t need to know about anyone. I’ve got my share of things I don’t like saying.”

“Who is Pearl Jessup?” Angela asked.

“It’s me. My husband’s name was Chancellor Jessup. When he up and left me here without a word, I left his name in the house we shared together, moved back into Pop’s house and went back to my old name. Where did you hear that name?”

“Mr. Shockley called you that by accident.”

“I’ll have to call Raynard and ask him not to have any more accidents, won’t I?”

“I guess you will, Pearl.”

In Pearl’s head, Pop hissed, “I told you about bringing strangers in the house, didn’t I, girl? People get in your business, try to understand it, get it all twisted and report it to the world as fact. The next thing you know, somebody is knocking on your door feeling like they can fix all of your problems. Start digging, Pearl.”



THE AUTHOR

Bernadette Y. Connor was born and raised in North Philadelphia. While still in high school, she embarked on a musical career and was well known on the east coast as an accomplished vocalist. A graduate of a vocational school, Ms. Connor became a communications technician for AT&T, climbing telephone poles in an era when such an activity was a rarity for a woman — and, according to her co-workers, accomplishing it with perfectly manicured nails and never a hair out of place! A divorced mother of three, she managed to purchase a house while her children were still young and see that they all excelled from kindergarten through college. It was this kind of determination, coupled with a compulsion to express herself, which led to her decision to achieve recognition through writing. The completion of four novels and the perfection of her craft were primarily accomplished in the wee hours of the morning while her children slept.

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